CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. An alphanumeric keyboard being connectable to a telephone line, the alphanumeric keyboard being operative to generate telephone number dialing signals on the telephone line as corresponding keys of the alphanumeric keyboard are pressed.

2. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 1, wherein the generating of telephone number dialing signals occurs when the alphanumeric keyboard is operating in a first operating mode, and wherein the keyboard is operative in a second operating mode to generate alphanumeric character code signals on the telephone line as corresponding keys of the keyboard are pressed.

3. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 2, the keyboard being operative to automatically enter the first operating mode when a local telephone device connected to a common telephone line with the keyboard is in an off-hook condition and no connection on the telephone line has been established, and the keyboard being operative to automatically enter the second operating mode when the local telephone device is in an off-hook condition and a connection on the telephone line has been established.

4. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 3, disposed in a common housing with the local telephone device.

5. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 2, the keyboard being operative to enter the first and second operating modes in response to corresponding indications from a user.

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6. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 5, including a switch by which the user makes the operating mode indications.

7. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 2, wherein the alphanumeric character code signals represent American Standard for Communications Information Interchange (ASCII) character codes.

8. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 2, including a display.

9. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 8, wherein the display is operative to display digits corresponding to the telephone number dialing signals as they are generated on the telephone line.

10. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 8, wherein the display is operative to display alphanumeric characters corresponding to alphanumeric character code signals generated on the telephone line.

11. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 2, including a display, memory, and processing logic.

12. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 11, further operable in a third operating mode, the keyboard being operative in the third operating mode to (i) accept a message entered by a user via the keys of the keyboard and (ii) store the entered message in the memory, and wherein the keyboard is further operative in the second operating mode to generate on the telephone line a sequence of alphanumeric character code signals representing the stored message.

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13. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 12, wherein the keyboard is operative to automatically enter the third operating mode when the local telephone device is in an on-hook condition.

14. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 11, being further operative in the second operating mode to (i) answer an incoming call on the telephone line, (ii) identify the caller who has placed the incoming call, and (iii) generate on the telephone line a sequence of alphanumeric character code signals representing a message previously stored in the memory, if the caller is identified as an intended recipient of the message.

15. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 14, being further operative to maintain a record of the incoming call and to provide the record to a user upon request.

16. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 11, including an interface to a printer.

17. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 11, being further operative to accept and store a user-entered telephone number in the memory, and being operative in the first operating mode to generate on the telephone line, upon a command from the user, a sequence of telephone number dialing signals corresponding to the stored telephone number.

18. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 11, being further operative to (i) receive a message from the telephone line, (ii) store the received message in the memory, and (iii) display the stored message to a user upon request.

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19. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 1, wherein the telephone number dialing signals are dual-tone multi-frequency signals.

20. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 1, wherein the telephone number dialing signals are pulse signals.

21. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 1, wherein (i) the telephone number dialing signals are associated with respective decimal digits, (ii) certain ones of the telephone number dialing signals are further associated with respective sets of letter characters, and (iii) each telephone number dialing signal is generated in response to the pressing of the key for the associated decimal digit and in response to the pressing of the key for each letter character in the associated set of letter characters.

22. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 1, wherein (i) certain ones of the telephone number dialing signals are associated with respective decimal digits, (ii) certain other ones of the telephone number dialing signals are associated with respective letter characters, and (iii) each telephone number dialing signal is generated in response to the pressing of the key for the associated decimal digit or letter character.

23. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 22, wherein the telephone number dialing signals are associated with a multi-frequency tone set.

24. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 23, wherein the telephone number dialing signals are associated with a dual tone multi-frequency tone set.

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25. An alphanumeric keyboard according to claim 1, wherein the telephone number dialing signals are uniquely associated with respective alphanumeric characters, and wherein each telephone number dialing signal is generated in response to the pressing of the key for the associated alphanumeric character.

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